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STAT

JACK ANDERSON

Leaks to Press May Have Sunk Habib Mission

Did a well-placed leak to the press help sink Philip C. Habib? President Reagan's recently removed special envoy in the Middle East may think so. Here's the story:

For months, Habib had been trying without success to persuade Israel and Syria to pull their troops out of Lebanon. Neither side would agree to make the first move. There was serious doubt that Syrian President Hafez Assad would withdraw his troops under any circumstances.

In June, the administration was toying with a plan that Habib hoped would break the stalemate. Simply put, the idea was to pressure Israel into a unilateral withdrawal, counting on Assad to follow the Israeli example. But before the plan could be initiated, someone in Washington leaked it to the press. The reaction was swift and predictable: Israel and her friends in Congress denounced the idea. The Lebanese didn't think much of it either.

A July 1 cable, classified "Secret—Alert," from Habib to Secretary of State George P. Shultz, stated bluntly: "The leaks out of Washington have produced an immensely damaging setback to our efforts here." My associate Lucette Lagnado has seen a copy of the cable.

Habib reported on a meeting he had held that morning with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Defense Minister Moshe Arens and Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

"Begin, Shamir and Arens made it clear... that there was no point in pursuing our alternative ideas for bringing about total withdrawal of all foreign forces. [They] urged that we limit the heavy damage already caused all of us, by making clear we continue to support the concept of simultaneous... withdrawals."

Habib had this advice for Shultz: "Under present circumstances, we all believe there is no point in your visiting the area at this time." He added that Sam Lewis, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, "strongly concurs."

But Shultz disregarded Habib's advice, went to the Middle East anyway, and failed to get Syria to agree to a troop withdrawal. It was an embarrassing failure for the administration.

Oddly enough, Habib's cable made clear that he thought the plan to force a unilateral Israeli withdrawal was still valid in the long run. "There is obviously no present possibility of pursuing our approach," he told Shultz. "Nevertheless, we do not necessarily rule out a revival of this approach at a later stage, if we can recover from the damage done by this leak."

The Middle East Policy Survey, an investigative newsletter, reports that the administration revived the plan during a visit by Israel officials to Washington last month.

Habib informed Shultz that the Israelis would go ahead with a limited, partial withdrawal, and added: "Depending on the ensuing circumstances, including the reaction in Lebanon, we may be able to take our idea from the back burner and try again."

Habib, who reportedly was the author of the controversial plan and was certainly its strongest advocate, is no longer in a position to try again.

Watch on Taxes: An optimistic Reagan, cheered by the rebounding economy, is more convinced than ever that new tax increases won't be needed. He says the bloated federal deficit can be reduced through spending cuts.

• Democratic leaders have no intention of launching a drive for higher taxes on the eve of the 1984 election. If the president doesn't request a tax increase, the Democrats who run the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee certainly won't push one on him. But neither are the Democrats likely to cut the social spending programs.

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